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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA'S UNIONS STUMBLE TOWARD DEMOCRACY

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the last week of 2006, three labor union federations, representing more than 120,000 garment, shoe, and rubber workers and teachers, held their congresses to elect new leaders. While the congresses fell short of democratic ideals, the increasing number of unions that are choosing to elect officers rather than continue under the leadership of unelected and long-serving founding presidents is a positive sign for union democratization. END SUMMARY.

Political Affiliations Apparent

¶12. (SBU) Three of Cambodia's unions--the pro-government confederation Cambodia Confederation of Trade Unions (CCTU), pro-opposition Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association (CITA), and the independent Cambodian Coalition of Apparel Workers Democratic Union (CCAWDU)--held union congresses and elections during the last week of 2006. Political ties were evident at the CCTU congress, which was chaired by Minister of Social Affairs Ith Sam Heng, and the CITA congress, where Sam Rainsy Party parliamentarian Keo Remy attended and gave a speech. Media coverage of the congresses also corresponded with political affiliation. Only the CCTU congress was covered in Khmer media, namely the pro-CPP Rasmei Kampuchea newspaper and the CPP's Apsara TV. CITA's election--which had wider significance than the others due to president Rong Chhun's political prominence--received coverage in the French-language daily Cambodge Soir, while CCAWDU received no coverage at all.

Flawed Elections are Better than No Elections

¶13. (SBU) At the CCTU congress, only the presidents of the eleven constituent unions, rather than the individual workers, were entitled to vote. Chuon Mom Thol, a prominent union leader who has come under increasing criticism for showing himself to be more interested in towing the CPP line than representing workers, chose not to run for re-election as president of the CCTU. Som Aun, who disappointed labor observers by welcoming government intervention in garment sector-wide union-employer minimum wage negotiations, was narrowly defeated by Vong Sovann, who is seen by outsiders as moderate and deliberate. For the first time, rank and file members were allowed to participate in the congress and observe the voting process. Collectively, the eleven unions making up the CCTU have an estimated 80,000 members in the garment, shoe, and rubber sectors.

¶14. (SBU) International and local labor observers and some CITA members criticized the CITA congress for the non-transparent way in which the union apportioned votes to provincial CITA representatives. Apparently fearing opposition from unions in a few provinces, CITA president and pro-opposition political leader Rong Chhun allegedly engineered the allocation of votes to ensure that provinces which supported him were given the lion's share of ballots--a tactic which he used at the last CITA congress in

November 2004. After calling for the election to be postponed so that the voting dispute could be resolved, several CITA members opposed to Rong Chhun's leadership stormed out of the congress, along with several observers. Rong Chhun was re-elected after his prime opponent, Suong Hout joined the walk-out. One improvement this year, however, was that the entire slate of union officers was up for election, rather than simply electing a president who has the authority to appoint the others. Although it has only 8,000 members, CITA has significant political clout due to its outspoken president, activist stance, and status as the only union representing civil servants.

¶ 15. (SBU) CCAWDU, one of the country's largest and most active garment sector unions with 36,000 members, also relied on a quota voting system, but in a far more democratic and transparent way than CITA. CCAWDU votes were allocated to factory-level unions based on the number of union members at each factory. Current CCAWDU President Ath Thorn, whose genuine enthusiasm for workers' interests is hampered by his sometimes rash and inconsistent leadership, was re-elected. Labor observers praised the CCAWDU congress and election as the most democratic of the three.

¶ 16. (SBU) While acknowledging the shortcomings of the voting procedures at the CCTU and CITA congresses, government officials and labor observers were generally sanguine about union democratization. American Center for International Labor Solidarity Country Director Alonso Suson described the elections as a good starting point and worthy of emulation by other unions. Oum Mean, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Labor, said that the elections were a "milestone for union democratization" and praised the unions as being more mature than before.

¶ 17. (SBU) COMMENT: Like Cambodia's political parties, the country's unions have traditionally been formed around one charismatic leader who is the self-appointed president. Just a few years ago, holding

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elections for leadership positions was unthinkable, as it jeopardized the time, energy, money, and political risk the founder had invested in establishing the organization. While still flawed, these congresses--and the increasing number of unions who are electing their leaders--are important steps in the democratization of Cambodia's adolescent union movement. END COMMENT.